



United States Consulate General Merida, Mexico

Consular Section

Security Message for U.S. Citizens – Telephone Scams

Dated July 10, 2012

The U.S. Consulate General in Merida advises Americans of a common scam utilized by criminals throughout Mexico - telephone extortion known as a “virtual kidnapping.” Although these types of calls vary in style, the methodology is invariably the same: the virtual kidnapping callers mention that they have kidnapped a loved one and often include a crying/pleading voice immediately after the call is answered and before the “kidnapper” gets on the phone. In this manner, they hope to confuse the victim and get them to give away important information; for example, if the crying voice sounds like your child in any way, and you call out that child’s name, the caller now knows the name of the child that could potentially be a kidnap victim, and will use this knowledge against you. The voice of the “victim” will usually be crying and/or hysterical – this makes it difficult to identify and increase the likelihood that you will believe it is in fact your loved one.

The criminals will try to use fear, tact and timing against you. For example, they plan their calls to coincide with times when it will be difficult to contact the child or another adult immediately (e.g. when children are either on their way to or from school). Or, the scammers will obtain two cell phones of two family members. They will call both victims at the same time and claim to have kidnapped the other relative. They will use fear and the threat of harm to keep both victims on the line while they press them to pay a “ransom”. Once the kidnappers are satisfied they have obtained as much money as they can, they end the call, leaving both family members poorer and confused.

Other variations on this scam use callers who claim to be lawyers, Mexican police, or even U.S. Consulate staff looking to help get one of your family members out of jail (or some other bad situation). They pressure you to pay them to waive charges or pay off alleged corrupt officials in order to free your loved one and avoid a long and expensive judicial process.

Often times the callers will make statements to suggest surveillance such as: “we saw you at the school with your truck”. Very vague but implying they have been watching your family and using fear and everyday routines against you to reinforce the threat of the kidnapping.

If you become the target of one of these calls, here are some important tips to remember:

- If you think the call is a hoax, simply hang up.

Below are additional guidelines, if there is no language barrier or you do not know the location of a loved one.

- Remain calm and try to locate your friend or family member. Remember, the vast majority of these calls are a hoax. Whether done as a prank or an attempt to extort money from you, the perpetrators are attempting to exploit your fears. If you have caller ID, write down the number.
- Do not tell the caller where you live or agree to any money transfer. Never provide information about you or your family.
- Ask to speak to your friend or family member to confirm his/her identity. This will foil the majority of these calls as the virtual kidnapper only has the upper hand as long as you believe that he/she really has your loved one. Don't be afraid to challenge them "what is my child's name?"
- If the caller cannot or will not answer, hang up (many will hang up at the first sign of stubbornness).

In the event you cannot locate your friend or family member after the caller has successfully answered the question or the caller actually puts your loved one on the line, it is very important that you attempt to do the following:

- If you have any reason to believe that someone has been kidnapped, keep the caller on the line as long as possible and have another family member contact the local police. For such emergencies the state police in Yucatan, Quintana Roo and Campeche may be reached at 066. A special number has been established to report telephone extortion, 088. If you are alone, contact the local police (066 or 088) as soon as possible.
- Listen and take note of the demands, tone or accent of the caller, background noise, and any other important information that could assist the police.
- Ask for a way to make contact with the caller. If they refuse to answer, ask when they will call again.

To reduce the likelihood of receiving one of these calls:

- Answer the phone with "hello" and make the other person ask for you by name.
- Know the details of your family's travel and location (where they are supposed to be, who they are supposed to be with, etc.), and contact information (land-line and cell phone numbers).
- Never provide personal information to someone who calls or approaches you.
- Do not post personal information on social networking sites.

If you received this email it means you are registered with us! Encourage your American friends, family, neighbors, and others you know to register. American citizens traveling or residing overseas are encouraged to register with the appropriate U.S. Embassy or Consulate on the State Department's travel registration website at <https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui/>. By registering, American citizens make it easier for the Embassy or Consulate to contact them in case of emergency.

The U.S. Consulate General in Merida, Yucatan, Mexico, has responsibility for the Mexican states of Quintana Roo, Yucatan, and Campeche. The Consulate can be reached during its regular business hours (M-F, 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) by telephone at 999-942-5700; by fax at 999-942-5777; and by email at meridacons@state.gov. After hours, for emergencies involving U.S. citizens, call the Consulate's main number and follow instructions to be connected to the Merida duty officer.

CONSULATE GENERAL MERIDA (Calle 60 No. 338-K x 29 y 31, Colonia Alcala Martin, Merida, Yucatan, Mexico)

Main switchboard dialing from the US: 011-52-999-942-5700

Main switchboard dialing from outside Merida but within Mexico: 01-999-942-5700

Thank you.

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